

ESTHER AND THE MAN

Esther was very late. The clock in the tower opposite had sputtered eleven strokes in the frosty air, and still Esther did not come. Nor did Martin Howard, who had promised to look in for a smoke on his way home. It is one of my principles that relatives should never stay in the same house. But Esther, becoming more prosperous, was moving into a more commodious flat, and was spending the interregnum of carpenters, whitewashers and paper hangers with me. The clock had struck the quarter past before I heard a cab drive up to the door. In a minute or so Esther's step sounded on the stairs—an agitated footstep, as one who has something to say in a hurry, and Esther herself herself appeared.

"Oh! I've had such a fright," she said breathlessly.

"Really! Dear me!" I said. "What was it?" Esther laid her sketchbook on the table and threw off her cape.

"A man," she said, and stood looking at me.

"Come, it might have been worse," I said. "It might have been a cow, or an earthquake!" Esther unskewed her hat and sat down.

"But he followed me," she said impressively.

"He didn't catch you?" I inquired.

"Don't be silly," Esther replied. "I tell you he followed me. I'll never think of walking home so late again—alone."

"Why did you 'onight?" I asked.

"Well, you know, I had to do those sketches at the dress rehearsal, and I couldn't get away until 10:30. Then I could only get a 'bus to Oxford Circus. And then I waited, and every 'bus was crowded, and I felt horrid waiting there. So I determined to walk. And as soon as I got out of the crowded part, I found there was a man following me."

"Close?"

"No, not very, but—
"How did you know? Did you look around?"

"Of course I didn't. But a girl can tell when anyone is following her."

"She can tell a policeman," I suggested. Esther reflected a moment, as she drew off her gloves.

"Yes, of course," she said. "But the poor man wasn't really doing any harm, you know. So there was nothing to tell—really."

"Then why disturb yourself about him?"

"Oh, you can't understand how a girl feels," said Esther, looking a little annoyed.

"But," I said after a pause, "I thought you came home in a cab."

"From the Marble Arch," said Esther. "I couldn't endure it any longer. I walked as fast as I could, and he walked just as fast. When I walked slowly to let him pass, he walked slowly, too. Twice I crossed to the other side of the street. And—would you believe it—he crossed to." Esther leaned forward in her chair to note the effect. I signified astonishment with my eyebrows in the usual way.

"And," she continued, "when I was nearly at the Marble Arch, I could feel him coming up behind me—quite near. I simply had to take a cab."

"It was a close shave," I said; "very close shave, indeed." Esther looked at me rather doubtfully.

"But—do you think he meant to do anything?" she asked.

"Well," I said, "I can hardly say, without knowing his previous career."

Of course, he might have been a highwayman; and, on the other hand—Hullo, Martin! Come in."

"I beg your pardon," said Martin, halting in the doorway; "I thought you were alone."

"All right," I said, "I was expecting you. You know my sister. We were just discussing the possibility"

"George, don't" said Esther under her breath.

"The possibility," I continued, "of assault and battery and highway robbery upon an unattended young woman in Oxford street. What do you think about it?"

"That's rather curious," said Martin, sitting down. "Only this evening I have been—in a sense—protecting a female in distress. I was confronted by a problem, and I should like your opinion on it, Miss Matthews."

Martin looked at Esther, who turned slightly in her chair with an obviously assumed air of interest. I can never understand why Esther does not like Martin, though I am quite certain she doesn't.

"I spotted her hurrying along Oxford street, just in front of me. She was a lady, and I could see she was very uncomfortable at being out so late alone. It really distressed me to see her edging into the road to make way for polite and inoffensive people. When she heard a couple of men coming along singing she almost ran and then stood still to let them get in front of her. Now there was a problem for me."

"I don't see that that there was any problem at all," said Esther, turning her face a little more toward the fire away from Martin.

"Here was a girl," said Martin, "who was frightened though there was nothing to be afraid of, so frightened that she was running backward and forward across the road whenever she saw any one within thirty yards. Doubtless she was a silly little goose. But she was a fellow creature. And as I was going in the same direction it was my obvious duty to assure her of safety. The problem was—how to assure her. I may smoke mayn't I?" Martin lit a cigar, and continued: "My first idea was to follow her until I saw her safely at home. But then it struck me that she wouldn't know I was behind, and so I would be doing her no good at all and giving myself a lot of trouble."

"You might," I suggested, "have called a cab and offered to give her a lift." Martin shook his head.

"No," said he, "that would never do. Do you think so, Miss Matthews?"

"I really don't know anything about it," said Esther.

"Well," said Martin, "This was my solution. I determined to address her respectfully—tell her I had noticed her embarrassment—assure her I was respectable—lived in a house and served on juries and all that—and offer to walk a dozen yards behind her until she reached her front door and then leave her without speaking. What do you think of that?"

"You didn't do it?" I said.

"No," said Martin. "Just as I had nearly overtaken her a lot of rowdy men came along, and she jumped into a cab. So I didn't bother myself any further about it."

"What did she look like?" asked Esther, with her face still turned toward the fire.

"Oh, like a girl," said Martin, "just

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an ordinary girl—with one of those silly capes that girls wear."

"Anything like this?" I asked, picking up Esther's cape.

Martin looked at the cape—at Esther whose face looked very red in the firelight—at the sketchbook on the table, and then at Esther again.

"I will say good night," said Esther rising.

"Oh, but"—stammered Martin, "you are not"

"It was nice of you," said Esther, "you gave me a dreadful fright."

"But, my dear Miss Matthews, I was only anxious to do you a service."

"It is not pleasant," said Esther, "to be followed by a strange man."

"But I'm not a stranger," said Martin, "I have known you ever since you wore—I mean since you were quite young."

"But I didn't know it was you. How could I? You should have come and told me."

"You see, I didn't know it was you."

"You ought to have known," said Esther. "And," she continued, after a moment's pause, "if you didn't know, it was very wrong of you to follow me—very wrong of you to follow me—very wrong indeed!"

Esther gathered up her hat, cape, gloves and sketchbook, and left the room. Martin and I looked at each other.

"I say old man," he said, "you don't imagine for a moment"

"Plain or with soda?" I inquired.

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